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Extended Abstract

Developing a Model of Teachers' Professional Ethics Based on Grounded Theory

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Introduction

Professional ethics, as a framework of moral principles and normative standards, guides desirable behavior in specialized fields such as teaching. Beyond legal compliance, it entails deep commitments to human dignity, justice, honesty, and professional responsibility (Kristjánsson, 2024). Teachers' ethical accountability toward students, colleagues, and society constitutes a vital dimension of social responsibility (Fan et al., 2020). Evidence shows that professional ethics enhances self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and instructional quality (Liu et al., 2024). Despite international progress (Yang et al., 2025; Cronqvist, 2025), Iranian research still lacks a context-sensitive and integrative model addressing the multi-level dynamics—individual, organizational, and socio-cultural—of teachers' ethical practice. This study employs a grounded theory approach to develop a comprehensive paradigm model of professional ethics among Iranian teachers, offering a conceptual foundation for educational policy, teacher development, and ethical evaluation.

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Methodology

The study population consisted of all experts in the field of professional ethics who were selected through a snowball sampling technique, following the principles of reputation and theoretical saturation. Participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: possession of a Ph.D. in a relevant discipline, a minimum of 15 years of teaching experience in the field, at least one published research paper on professional ethics, and voluntary consent to participate in the study. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile device and transcribed verbatim after completion. Each interview lasted approximately 70 minutes. Data analysis was conducted using Strauss and Corbin's (2015) grounded theory approach in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Findings

A total of 571 primary codes were extracted from the interviews (50, 40, 27, 45, 50, 20, 35, 25, 25, 50, 45, 70, 45, and 44 codes from interviews 1 to 14, respectively). Based on the coding results, five major dimensions were identified: (1) causal conditions (sociocultural identity, self-knowledge, and preference for organizational interests); (2) intervening conditions (spirituality and personality); (3) strategies (professional development enhancement, selection, and appointment); (4) contextual conditions (awareness of and respect for macro-level policies, and social status); and (5) consequences (professional ethics toward students, parents, colleagues, and society).

To validate the proposed model, the Delphi method was employed. The model and its coding framework were presented to five university professors, who evaluated and confirmed the classification of indicators, subcategories, and dimensions with an agreement coefficient of 0.85.

Conclusion

In sum, the model of teachers' professional ethics represents a dynamic and organic system. The causal conditions—including sociocultural identity, self-knowledge, and preference for organizational interests—serve as the roots and driving forces that determine the overall direction of the teacher's ethical framework. These conditions function within a specific context shaped by macro-level policies and social status, which can either facilitate or constrain ethical development. Within this context, strategies such as professional growth, appropriate selection, and appointment act as deliberate actions and tools for cultivating ethical values. However, the path toward ethical maturity is not linear; intervening conditions—notably personality and spirituality—may operate as reinforcing (e.g., moral integrity, spiritual strength) or inhibiting (e.g., personality

conflicts, lack of spiritual grounding) factors. Ultimately, the consequences—teachers' ethical behavior toward students, parents, colleagues, and society—emerge as outcomes of this complex interplay. This dynamic interaction demonstrates that professional ethics is not a static set of rules, but a continuous process of formation, challenge, and growth that gains meaning through ongoing interaction among the individual, the profession, and society. Strengthening each dimension and fostering their organic interconnections are essential for institutionalizing authentic and sustainable professional ethics within the educational system.

Based on the findings of this study, two key recommendations are proposed:

- Integrated professional development programs: Considering the central role of self-knowledge and spirituality in the model, it is recommended to design teacher training programs that address not only pedagogical skills but also personal growth, self-awareness, and the cultivation of ethical virtues. Such programs can foster holistic development and reinforce the internalization of professional ethics.
- Enhanced teacher selection and social recognition: Given the importance of selection and appointment as a key strategy and the influence of social status as a contextual condition, it is recommended that teacher recruitment processes extend beyond formal qualifications to include assessment of personality traits, social commitment, and spiritual motivation. Simultaneously, institutional initiatives and media campaigns should promote a respectful and valued image of the teaching profession within society, thereby strengthening teachers' social standing and ethical engagement.

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